

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AFRICA

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Role played by countries and organizations

Conflict prevention and resolution in Africa is a much debated subject in recent years. This is due to the fact that Africa continues to witness conflicts- some old and some new- most of which have proved to be resistant to efforts at resolution.

Conflicts; An Overview

While it may not be easy to classify conflicts in a categorical way, not all conflicts in Africa are of the same kind as can be seen below:

- Interstate conflicts - ***such as the Ethio-Eritrean conflict***
- Intrastate conflicts limited mainly to within a state- ***such as the Angolan civil war, and conflicts in Somalia, Algeria, CAR and Senegal.***
- Conflicts that are spread over a number of countries - ***such as the conflicts in Central and West Africa.***
- Potential conflicts - ***such as over transboundary water resources like the Nile River.***

Many conflicts erupt due to clashes over access to resources, for instance as a result of the encroachment of one party on lands traditionally considered by another to be on its own terrain.

Some conflicts over resources have emerged from earlier cold-war-driven disputes fought by African proxies in such countries as Angola, and Mozambique.

Other conflicts have broken out as a result of unmarked or unacceptable borders (Ethiopia-Eritrea, Cameroun-Nigeria, Libya-Chad) or because of poor governance and exclusion from the sharing of power.

What is common to all the conflicts is that fighting takes place in areas characterized by deep poverty, economic stagnation and the lack of hope for the future. It is also evident that conflicts are generated by those considered to be from the elite. While conflicts are caused by the reasons referred to earlier, they are mainly manifested by a falling out between elites, or between members of the same national elite. Generally it is those believed to be more enlightened

who incite the poor, calling on their followers to take violent action. Those who pay the supreme sacrifice are always the poor, the foot soldiers for the "cause."

In light of the limitations in the political, economic and material capacities of individual African states, it is clear that the forces that can contribute to conflict resolution are those that have the influence and experience, or the financial and material wherewithal to be able to do so. Recent history has shown that without outside help, individual countries are usually not up to the task of resolving conflicts of a major scale that erupt within their borders.

The Role of Neighbouring States

While neighbouring states could be a contributing factor to conflicts in countries, they have been shown to play a role in the "spirit of a neighbour" of helping a sister state in resolving conflicts.

Initiatives of neighbouring states, however, have limitations. As they are geographically and therefore politically, economically and socially close to the conflict, neighbours may not be seen as fair arbiters by one or the other party. Neither do African states have the material and infrastructural capacity to single-handedly take on such responsibilities. For instance, they cannot absorb the influence of refugees and displaced persons without external support.

And yet, when they play constructive roles, neighbouring states are indispensable to the resolution of conflicts. They represent a factor of stability and serve as the "example - next-door" of the benefits of peace. As knowledgeable partners who are familiar with the personalities involved, neighbouring states can play a vital role in efforts to end conflicts.

The Role of Regional and Continental Organizations

Africa is a host to a number of regional organizations that have taken upon themselves the responsibility to assure peace and stability in their region, in addition to other political and economic objectives. The organizations being referred to include the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development IGAD in the Horn of Africa, and the East African Cooperation (EAC). At the continental level, the sole organization is the African Union. In addition there is another grouping of over 17 states known as CENSAD, made up of West, North, Sahelian and some Horn of Africa states.

Some of these organizations have demonstrated that regional bodies can play an important and, in some cases, a central role in dealing with conflicts for a number of reasons.

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Regional organizations are made up of countries involved in a conflict and those that are not. As a result, they have the proximity, and at the same time the sense of balance that allows them to politically define the nature of the conflict. Political and geographical proximity allows these organizations to realize the effects and repercussions of a given conflict, and, if necessary, to seek support from extra-regional sources to bring the dispute to an end.

Credibility is what regional organizations bring to conflict resolution. Generally, they are seen to be fair and knowledgeable, and can therefore co-author and spearhead peace efforts. Their initiatives can receive the backing of extra-regional organizations both at pan African, and non African levels due to the trust placed upon them.

But matters are not so straight-forward. Regional organizations are made up of individual countries, some of which are large and influential within the sub-region. Each region in Africa has countries that are strong economically or militarily, allowing their governments to influence the initiatives that the regional organization promotes. In many cases, the leader of an influential state takes the initiative and secures the support of other member states of the region in order to launch a peace effort in the name of a given regional organization.

Such a situation has its pros and cons. Influential states have the benefit of being relatively more able to make things happen. On the other hand, they can be perceived as pushing others around. Whatever the case, one cannot speak of ECOWAS without Nigeria or SADC without South Africa. Regarding the Horn, Ethiopia is the most populous and centrally situated country in the IGAD region.

There are also differences in the extent to which regional organizations have played a role in conflict resolution. ECOWAS and IGAD have been the most active in dealing with conflicts in West Africa, Sudan and Somalia respectively. SADC has established a Committee on Defence and Security and there is consultation on political, defence and security matters among the member states of the EAC.

The role, or potential role of the African Union, should not be belittled. In its present revitalized form, the AU has begun to project a stronger image, and its stamp of approval for the activities of regional organizations is likely to be needed more and more.

Neither should it be believed that SADC or IGAD or ECOWAS member states make the best mediators or the ideal sources of peace-keeping troops in their respective regions. The use of troops from neighbouring countries could, in some cases, be unwise. Utilizing a Malian official to handle a crisis in East Africa and, using troops mainly from Southern Africa could be more appropriate for instance. Such a responsibility would best be taken by the African Union.

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At this point, note should be made of initiatives involving the whole continent, such as NEPAD, and another covering the northern half of Africa namely CENSAD. NEPAD is described as the development program for Africa; or the framework for progress through which African countries, and the African Union, are measured. Its principles of good governance, including the peer review mechanism, can play an important role in the prevention of internal conflict in African states.

CENSAD, however, presents a more blurred picture. It has long gone beyond being a community of Sahelian states. Its members have adopted ambitious plans, including entering into obligations of a political, security and military nature. To many, CENSAD looks like a "fast track AU" strongly influenced by Libya. With the necessary financial support, it may be able to play a role in dealing with conflicts among its members. Some observers, however, believe that CENSAD constitutes another layer of pan African organization that is unnecessary. It would make more sense for such an organization to include those not already belonging to the five "building block" organizations of the African continent

The Balance between Internal (African) and External Diplomacy

Any discussion of conflicts in Africa must take into account the importance of non African actors - the United Nations Security Council, the United States, the European Union and major member states.

This must be done for political and economic reasons. The political authority of the United Nations Security Council, the only global institution with the mandate of assuring peace and security anywhere in the world, is critical in driving home to conflicting parties the importance and urgency of reaching a settlement.

While diplomacy at the African level should concentrate more on identifying and elaborating the political substance of the initiative to resolve a given conflict, diplomacy at the level of the U.S., UN and EU should emphasize the role the international community would need to play to ensure that the world is behind the initiative, and that they would help in technical and material terms to provide a developmental solution to the crisis.

Some persons simplify this arrangement with the phrase, "the Americans issue the order, the Europeans pay, the Africans fight" As in all simplifications there is some grain of truth in this. But what is essential is that all the 'partners' in the peace process share various responsibilities to some degree or another. The African side is investing its people in large numbers in conflict resolution. The rest should not just pay and monitor. Peace keeping in Africa is not just the responsibility of Africans. Others need to join in, although maybe not to the same extent in human terms. But they cannot expect to deal with the peace

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process by remote control. It has been shown, for example in Sierra Leone, that non African combatants can play a decisive role in assuring peace.

Nor should we believe that a political solution can only be devised by Africans alone. We should not forget that the U.S played an important role, together with the EU and the AU on the Ethio-Eritrea conflict.

What can be said is that conflict resolution efforts need to be inclusive (local, regional, continental, international) and at the same time workable. There need not be a contradiction between inclusivity and practicality. In fact, inclusivity has been seen in practice to be the best way forward.

Note

When referring the external diplomacy there are two more developments that need to be examined further. The first is the tendency for the African states neighbouring the Mediterranean to look more and more to Europe (and vice versa) rather than to the rest of Africa. The EU-Mediterranean Partnership and separate EU negotiations with North African countries are prying most these states away from Africa both politically and economically.

Secondly, the role of the Arab League and the Islamic Conference Organization in Africa needs to be considered. Some countries have used their membership in African organizations to solicit support for purely Arab/Middle Eastern causes. The Arab League could also be instrumentalized to promote the interest of its member states in Africa against African countries that are not its members.

The Balance between Bilateral Relationships and International Organizations

In seeking world-wide support for the resolution of African conflicts, there is always the need to engage influential states on the one hand, and international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union on the other.

Whether in East Timor, Haiti or Georgia it has been shown that it is essential to get the United States on board to back, or at the very least, not to oppose an initiative designed to resolve conflicts.

That is true for Africa as well. Garnering the support of the United States goes a long way in building support in the United Nations Security Council. To a smaller extent, that is also the case for the United Kingdom.

At the same time, it is important to ensure that efforts are made to secure the support of France, Russia and China, as far as the United Nations Security Council is concerned.

There are also certain non Security Council countries that could play an important role in assisting in conflict prevention in Africa. Experience has shown that Norway, and, in

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the past, Italy have contributed to building confidence and peace in such conflicts as those in Sudan, in Central Africa and in Mozambique.

Certain non governmental institutions such as the Carter Centre in the USA and the Community of St. Egidio in Rome have facilitated contacts and made peace initiatives. But at the end of the day, a peace effort needs to be backed by political authorities both at the regional and at the international level for it to have a real chance of influencing the conflicting parties positively.

While addressing the major countries bilaterally, it is essential to direct diplomatic activities at officials in charge of international organizations. In this regard, the United Nations Secretariat, led by the Secretary General must be a key target of diplomacy. Although it may be assumed that the U.N Secretariat does the bidding of members of the Security Council, the Secretariat could play a pivotal role on issues that are not a matter of priority to the Permanent Five. And in most cases, African issues do not figure high on the bilateral agenda of the powerful countries in the UN. The same applies to the European Union. More and more international issues are the subject of regular consultation among EU member states. African issues are handled in Brussels at different levels and the opinion of the Commission - which is informed by its numerous representatives on the continent - can not be taken lightly.

It can therefore be concluded that outside of Africa, the diplomatic activity would need to be inclusive of individual states and international organizations, although the influence of major states does go a long way in forming the final decision that international organizations make.